

Palestinians say no to truce without Israeli withdrawal

EU seeks to buttress Powell's peace quest

AFP, Gaza City

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP Monday there can be no ceasefire, as called for in a UN resolution, without Israel first withdrawing its troops from Palestinian-run land, a move also specified by the United Nations.

"Without a withdrawal from all the territories occupied by Israel we cannot implement resolution 1402," passed earlier this month and calling for an immediate ceasefire and an Israeli pull back from Palestinian territory it has re-occupied.

Israel has refused to withdraw, arguing that since the resolution mentions an immediate ceasefire first, then goes on to call for a withdrawal, it is under no obligation to pull back until the truce is secured.

But Erakat slammed the Israeli stance, saying: "There's no one step or two steps. The ceasefire needs two sides, and the Israeli government is destroying all the Palestinian foundations in the West Bank."

He said he would raise the issue when he met with US officials later in the day in Jericho to follow up on a visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"We will discuss all issues, security, economic and political, as well as an Israeli withdrawal from all the territories it has occupied" said Erakat, who is

based in the town just east of Jerusalem.

He gave no specific time for the start of the talks.

The talks were scheduled after Powell held a meeting with Palestinian Yasser Arafat in his besieged West Bank headquarters in Ramallah, which he described as "useful and constructive."

Powell held a second meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon later Sunday.

Sharon proposed a Middle East conference in the United States to discuss the crisis, but failed to give a timetable for an end to his 17-day offensive to smash militant groups in the West Bank.

Washington gave its approval to the idea, while Arafat said he would agree to such a summit if Israel pulled back its troops from self-rule areas.

Meanwhile, EU foreign ministers were looking for ways Monday to pressure Israel into halting its military offensive in the West Bank, including possible sanctions, in support of US Secretary of State Colin Powell's efforts to cool down the Middle East conflict.

Officials expected the General Affairs Council to reaffirm EU policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including an appeal for an immediate ceasefire and resumption of negotiations.



Smoke rises near the besieged Church of the Nativity in the West Bank town of Bethlehem on Monday after the Israeli army reportedly launched smoke bombs and stun grenades around the church, where Christians believe Jesus Christ was born. Negotiations on the fate of some 200 Palestinian gunmen holed up in the church have so far failed.

Parliament adjourns in chaos in India

AFP, New Delhi

Both houses of the Indian parliament adjourned amid angry scenes on Monday, with opposition MPs demanding the dismissal of the chief minister of Gujarat state, where sectarian violence has claimed more than 800 lives.

The uproar signalled a stormy time ahead for the government in parliament which was returning from a three-week recess.

No sooner had question time begun then opposition members of both houses leaped to their feet, asking that the government respond to a total of 56 proposals to convene a special debate on the Gujarat issue.

Rebel commander, 19 others killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The chief commander of a prominent Islamic rebel group and 19 other people were killed in separatist-linked violence in Indian-administered Kashmir, authorities said on Sunday.

Abdul Rehman, a Pakistani who commanded Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami (HUJI), was killed by the Indian army in an encounter in the Sonarvan forest area of Bandipora, 60 km north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar on Sunday, an army spokesman said.

Three other militants were killed in the battle, two of them from Pakistan and one a local Kashmiri, the spokesman said. An army soldier also died in the fighting that raged for eight hours.

42 killed in Burundi

AFP, Bujumbura

Forty-two people were killed, most of them civilians, in fighting and in a grenade explosion in Burundi earlier this month, a local human rights group said.

Thirty-eight people were killed April 6 after soldiers surrounded a house in the northwestern village of Gihanga, Bubanza Province, thought to be harbouring rebels, the Burundi Human Rights League said in a statement.

The occupants opened fire, triggering fierce fighting that killed 29 civilians, seven rebels from the Hutu National Liberation Forces (FNL) and two soldiers, the group said.

US troops comes under fresh attack in Afghanistan

AFP, Bagram Air Base

US troops and their Afghan allies have come under fresh attack from al-Qaeda extremists in Afghanistan and expect more clashes over the summer, a spokesman said Monday.

US Major Bryan Hiltferty said a joint US-Afghan patrol was attacked by suspected al-Qaeda militants on Saturday at an undisclosed location somewhere in Afghanistan.

Air support was called in and five out of an estimated 20 attackers were killed, but there were no casualties among the coalition forces.

"Vehicles had bullet holes but there were no casualties on our side," Hiltferty said.

Pakistan blasts Vajpayee for anti-Muslim remarks

AFP, Islamabad

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akistan reacted angrily Sunday to Indian premier Atal Behari Vajpayee's controversial comments about Muslims, describing his remarks as "bigoted" and accusing him of promoting Hindu fascism.

The government of Pakistan is seriously concerned at the bigoted and extremist message contained in the Indian Prime Minister's remarks," a foreign ministry statement said.

"(Vajpayee) is a promoter of the Hindu fanatic and fascist agenda. The remarks reveal Mr Vajpayee's anti-Muslim bias. They are a pathetic attempt to divert attention from the recent massacres of hundreds of Muslims by Hindu fanatics in Gujarat state of India."

Vajpayee made the comments on Friday at a speech to members of his ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party.

The address, in which he blamed India's social woes on Islamic extremism and Muslim intolerance, follows the death of around 750 mostly Muslims in a month of

clashes between Hindus and Muslims in India's Gujarat state.

"Hindus stay in millions but never hurt others' religious feelings. But wherever Muslims are, they do not want to stay peacefully," Vajpayee told the BJP meeting in the western Indian seaside resort of Goa.

"It is happening in Indonesia, Malaysia, everywhere. They (Muslims) stay by threatening and frightening others," he said.

The clashes in Gujarat were triggered by the massacre of 58 Hindu pilgrims by a Muslim-led mob at the end of February.

Pakistan, an Islamic nation, said Vajpayee should also outline his views on extremist and "terrorist" Hindu organisations.

Pakistan and India, uneasy nuclear neighbours, frequently trade barbed and often personal comments.

Tensions between the two countries have been running high after New Delhi blamed Pakistan-based militants for an attack on its parliament that left 14 people dead.

'Indian troops on Pak border mean business'

AFP, New Delhi

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India on Monday said its troops massed on the border with Pakistan were more than mere military window dressing and ruled out any pull back in the near future.

"The forces deployed on the border are not for any show, but for business," India's chief of air staff, Air Chief Marshal S. Krishnaswamy told a conference of air force commanders in New Delhi.

"If called upon, we will do what is expected of us," he added.

India moved hundreds of thousands of its troops to its western borders with Pakistan less than a month after a deadly attack on its parliament complex in December, which New Delhi has blamed on two Pakistan-based militant groups.

India accuses Pakistan of arming, funding and training

Chavez moves to mend ties with military

AFP, Caracas

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fter surviving a coup attempt, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has moved to improve his relations with the military while urging troops to forge a closer bond with civilian society.

"The importance of uniting the people with the armed forces must be preserved and strengthened," Chavez told paratroopers at a military base in Maracay, 80 km west of Caracas Sunday. "Otherwise, we could still be fighting in the streets."

Emergency workers tallied 41 deaths and 323 injuries in the wake of Thursday's demonstrations that led up to Chavez's temporary removal from power.

The Maracay paratrooper outfit, in which Chavez once served, was the first unit to publicly defy a civilian-military coup that deposed him Friday, a key move that led to the interim government's resignation Saturday and Chavez's return.

Aware that some troops participated in the coup, Chavez sought to

reestablish military affinity with the citizenry against the elite that deposed him.

At the same time, he held out an olive branch to the political opposition after his swearing-in early Sunday.

"There will be no witch hunts, no persecution, no disrespect for free expression or thought," Chavez said, calling for calm. "The country needs an opposition that is loyal to the country, that offers the nation real criticism and alternatives."

But Defence Minister Jose Vicente Rangel said the members of the military, who participated in the coup attempt, had been handed over to justice officials.

"They are now in the hands of the attorney general and the military prosecutors," Rangel said in a television interview.

With the Venezuelan probe into the coup barely begun, Newsweek magazine reported Monday that military officers, who tried to topple Chavez, were in contact with the US embassy in Caracas less than two months ago.

Venezuela Three presidents in two days

3 Saturday, April 13

Chavez held at Orchila Island
Carmona steps down
Diosdado Cabello named new president

1 Thursday, April 11

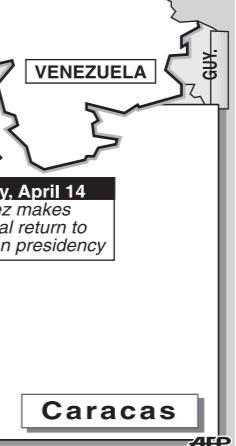
Violent clashes
civilian-military revolt
Chavez arrested

2 Friday, April 12

Chavez arrested
Businessman Pedro Carmona takes power,
dissolves parliament

4 Sunday, April 14

Chavez makes emotional return to Venezuelan presidency



Caracas

US troops and their Afghan allies have come under fresh attack from al-Qaeda extremists in Afghanistan and expect more clashes over the summer, a spokesman said Monday.

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Nepali king appeals for peace

REUTERS, Kathmandu

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epal's king on Sunday appealed for peace and unity in a New Year message to his nation, three days after 112 people were killed in an increasingly bloody communist revolt to topple him.

"All Nepalese ... must ... unite in widening the base of mutual confidence and understanding through democratic exercise," King Gyanendra said in a message marking the Himalayan Hindu kingdom's new year.

"Continued violence and destruction of development infrastructure in the country has left our economy in shambles."

The tiny impoverished nation is

under emergency rule as the king and the government try to crush Maoist rebels seeking to create a one-party communist state and who control about a quarter of the country.

Meanwhile, at least 26 Maoist rebels have been killed by security forces in Nepal, the defence ministry said Monday.

Seventeen rebels were shot dead on Sunday in Murkuti, 390 kilometres (243 miles) west of Kathmandu, a statement said.

Some of the dead were allegedly involved in an attack on Friday which left at least 164 people dead in the southwestern Dang district, and was the deadliest in the six-year Maoist rebellion.

UN RH rights forum slams Israel for 'mass killings'

AFP, Geneva

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he UN's top human rights forum on Monday condemned Israel for "acts of mass killings" against the Palestinians, in a resolution supported by some European countries.

Austria, Belgium, France, Portugal, Spain and Sweden all backed the text presented at the UN Human Rights Commission by Pakistan on behalf of Islamic countries, according to an official UN

count. The resolution expressed "grave concern" at the deterioration of human rights and the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly "at acts of mass killings perpetrated by the Israeli occupying authorities against the Palestinian people".

Germany and Britain voted against the resolution, which was adopted with the support of 40 of the Commission's 53 members. Five voted against, and seven abstained. One was absent.